PTSD in Asian and Pacific Islanders: Medical 3

Written Video Transcript

Our next Vietnam veteran, Mel Rivera, suffered terribly with PTSD. A Filipino veteran, Mel recalls his difficulties readjusting after the Vietnam war. It took him 30 years and many tries until his family finally encouraged him to seek out treatment. [00:00.20.00]

Instead of me going to work I'd just sit in my apartment, sit in the corner and get, you know. And I just would break down and cry. I mean I don't know why. But I used to get a depressive mood where I just wanted to call myself. My mom kept telling me, you know, "Why are you so [00:00.40.00] coldhearted?" I said, "Mom, I'm not coldhearted. I'm still the same person I am." She said, "No, you know, ever since you came back from Vietnam you're so coldhearted." I said, "Well, if you don't like it, you know, I don't have to come around." And I guess that hurt her. [00:01.00.00] So, I guess she called my brother.

But Mel's mother and brother would not give up. His brother convinced him to talk with a counselor at the vet center.

I stayed there two hours and we're talking about Vietnam, and I sat there and cried. And I finally realized that there is something wrong with me. [00:01.20.00] You know. And there was something that from Vietnam was bothering me from long time ago and it was in the back of my mind. And every so often there's some things that triggers it. [00:01.40.00]

Mel said it was extremely difficult fighting a war where the enemy looked like himself. The only difference was the uniform. Mel shared one story in which he was told by his lieutenant to watch an enemy group of North Vietnamese prisoners of war.

You know, there was five of them. They all stood up [00:02.00.00] and they started walking. So, in Vietnamese I told them to stop. And [laughs] they said they told me, "No, no, no, we're all the same." I said, you know, "No, we're not."

It's been a long tough road for Mel and for other Asian-American and Pacific Islander [00:02.20.00] veterans who served in Vietnam.

You know, what helped me from the vet center was the counseling, you know, learning how to control my temper and learning what triggers my PTSD, [00:02.40.00] you know. And from anger management that the vet center set up for me I've learned how to control my anger at my occupation because I deal with a lot of people. One thing that I found out with PTSD [00:03.00.00] is to accept the fact that there is something wrong with all Vietnam vets, especially the ones that went in combat. Even though we were called baby

killers or murderers, you know, there's a time when we got to accept the fact and get out of the denial. [00:03.20.00]

The Vietnam war challenged so many veterans like Melvin. For Asian-American and Pacific Islander veterans fighting as Asian-based war they faced additional hardships.

During the Vietnam War [00:03.40.00] the Asian-American movement was also emerging at the same time, in 1968. And one of the major concerns of the movement was the war itself as a racist war. And this interpretation resulted from the return of Asian-American veterans who related stories of the treatment that they were subject to [00:04.00.00] in Vietnam. What happened to many Asian-American veterans in Vietnam was that they were being called by the same term, gook, that American GIs used to refer to the Vietnamese. And this gook stereotype essentially portrayed Vietnamese and Asians in general as inferior [00:04.20.00] and subhuman and I imagine led to atrocities committed to Vietnamese people including both civilians and military.

Being exposed to some of the kinds of racist remarks that were said about Vietnamese, I sort of [00:04.40.00] had an affinity to Vietnamese because again, they would say to you same thing and I wouldn't agree with that. And but also would feel somewhat hurt that a lot of the American soldiers would dehumanize by calling them gooks, (things), slant eyes [00:05.00.00] and would make fun of them.

Well, the racist treatment began even during training camp when some Asian-American soldiers related that during the training camp they were asked to step forward in front of the rest of the platoon and were told, "Well, this is what the enemy looks like." So, even before they set foot in Vietnam they were being subject to this [00:05.20.00] very different kind of racist treatment.

An example might be a veteran who was pointed out as an example of the enemy during basic training, or a veteran who was called a gook repeatedly by fellow American soldiers while serving in Vietnam. [00:05.40.00] Or a veteran whose authority was questioned because he was Asian and as a consequence another American soldier died. Or the veteran who is on convoy with other American soldiers who are throwing cans and swearing [00:06.00.00] at the Vietnamese children along the road. And the veteran, the Asian-American Pacific Islander veteran says in his mind, but not in his voice, those children could be my family. VA providers and vet center providers could do the Asian-American Pacific Islander veterans [00:06.20.00] a great service by assessing race-related stressors. Whether this is a CMP examination for compensation and pension, whether this is an interview for readjustment problems or whether this is for treatment, the Asian-American Pacific Islander veteran [00:06.40.00] may well have experienced negative, stressful or traumatic race related experiences while serving in the U.S. military.

So, there's a conflict here between denying who they are, denying that there's part of a relationship here with this other Asian unit of people that they're supposed to be [00:07.00.00] fighting against because they're patriotic about what they're supposed to be

doing. But then there's this cultural, even almost what I would term an emotional conflict that's going on because—a relationship just by recognition. They would say here I am fighting for my country and I gotta [00:07.20.00] watch my back. Not only the front with the enemy, but I got to watch my back from those that I'm serving with. So, there's a lot of anger there that we have to deal with.

It's important for healthcare professionals to feel comfortable talking about racial and ethnic issues and to be prepared [00:07.40.00] to treat these problems should they emerge in your discussions with the veteran. Now, we'd like to introduce our next veteran, Mike (Kamasato). Mike, a Korean War veteran and Japanese-American, also recently sought treatment for PTSD.

It's really traumatic [00:08.00.00] for me, you know, when I go to (Punchbul) because I have not only my (war buddy) but I have some friends over there, a lot of my friends.

The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, at (Punchbul), was built to honor the sacrifices of America's armed forces during World War II, [00:08.20.00] the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

So, every (Memorial Day) I go over there to give out flowers. We had mutual understanding that if I should pass away or he passed away, don't bring marigolds. [00:08.40.00] [laughs] Don't bring the flower marigold. Said, bring better flower than that. [laughs] So, still today I don't bring marigolds to (Punchbul). At first, after I got out in 1952, I didn't want to talk about [00:09.00.00] any combat. I thought (the army) was worst thing, you know. But my wife told me that [9:13] get nightmares and dreaming and curling up myself (under) my dreams. And she always used to tell me, [00:09.20.00] 'What you did this morning? I seen you mumbling to yourself and curled up." So, men of this Japan American they don't want to come to get help. [00:09.40.00] The benefits are there, you know. So, I don't know even for myself it took me that long.

Mike served in the Korean War for 21 months and was released after suffering a severe combat wound fighting the North Koreans. [00:10.00.00]

When I was going down to a prone position again I heard this chattering, this high pitched sound, small arms firing at me. And that's when I knew I got wounded. The bullet penetrated to my [10:19] over here, hit my [00:10.20.00] index finger and my middle finger on the joint and one other round hit me on my shoulder. I think I'm really grateful for serving for United States government because [00:10.40.00] they really take care of the veterans. You've got to understand the vet first, and know his background and whatever. Because when I first came to see Mr. (Brov), my counselor, he [00:11.00.00] talked to me about a lot of families and whatever I do and what kind of hobby I have. I think that really helps, you know, you get to know (that guy).

As you heard form Mike, his counselor first chose to talk story with him so that Mike could get to know his counselor and begin to form a relationship. [00:11.20.00] It's

important to be open and patient. As medical providers you may want to consider the following.

I would encourage clinicians, primary care providers, to even though we're pressured to move a little quicker, that we take that extra moment [00:11.40.00] to ask those questions, those important questions. Let's sort of clarify and verify, if you will, to find out if our perception is correct.

There's a sense of insensitivity, a sense of jadedness that comes about. This next client becomes the next client, and what's going on here? [00:12.00.00] And if we go back to the days of our schooling and you learn about counseling and working with these people. One of the most important component in there is establishing a relationship.

I think the thing to keep in mind is in general traumatized people are very sensitive to rejection and threats and potential threats, [00:12.20.00] traumatized minorities even more so. So, important qualities that the therapist or the interviewer needs to have are the things any good therapist would demonstrate. Genuineness, empathy, warmth, interest and openness about the veteran's culture. [00:12.40.00]

In San Jose, California, we asked a small group of Asian-American Pacific Islander veterans to share their thoughts and feelings about receiving treatment for PTSD and what they would like providers to keep in mind.

In my culture, Filipino, they have to look you in the eye [00:13.00.00] when you're talking, you know, and be patient and talk slowly. Don't be so pushy because our culture, my Filipino culture, if you be too pushy I want to keep quiet. That's the way I am. Just be patient [00:13.20.00] and ask me slowly and I'll answer the question.

You're looking at us as Asians and you think that we have a heavy accent and you may not be able to understand us and you're not going to understand us. But if you listen carefully you'll understand us and we'll be able to communicate.

Our culture is different from [00:13.40.00] the culture here and different places. And they understand where you come from and, you know, how, how you will react if they ask you a question. But when somebody else out of your culture ask you like (you're stumped) [00:14.00.00] like you're scared or something.

I felt that one of my biggest trauma not only was being in a war, but as an Asian looking like an Asian and looking like the enemy. I think that's very important [00:14.20.00] that they understand that. Because, you know, I felt the prejudice while I was there.

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